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ABSTRACT

Teacher centers in America can provide the vehicle for the improvement of education through a) the professionalization of educators, b) the education of the public, and c) the repoliticization of education. Teacher centers can serve as the point of input for the knowledge necessary for the professionalization of educators and can function as the interface between educators and the consuming public in the development of goals and objectives for the educational system. A real education profession cooperating with a knowledgeable public (via teacher centers) can begin to develop a responsive decision-making system involving all the necessary constituencies, which will be able to make defensible decisions about educational alternatives that will meet the needs of children. The teacher center movement in America has the potential to become the focal point of improvement in American education. (HMD)

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THE FUTURE--DO TEACHER CENTERS HAVE ONE?

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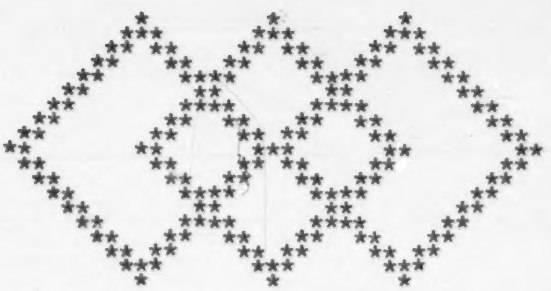

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The title of this presentation may suggest to some a rhetorical question--that clearly is not the case. As one analyzes educational movements of the past twenty-five years, the future of any new educational invention must be considered guarded, right from the beginning. Even though this speaker supports all the things that teacher centering is about--things like cooperation, shared resources, merging of theory and practice, merging of inservice and preservice, priority on teaching, personalization, and individualization--it would not be difficult to view its educational prognosis in relation to other movements of recent history . . . movements like differentiated staffing, team teaching, and core curriculum. Teacher centers do, however, hold a promise--a more global promise that requires a fair analysis and a fair trial of the concept.

I intend to focus my look into the future of teacher centers around three issues: 1) the professionalization of educators, 2) the education of the public, and 3) what I call the "re-politicalization" of education. Prior to explicating my interpretation of these issues however, it should be clearly stated that I don't see teacher centers surviving or not surviving on these issues, but rather, I relate these issues to the potential for significance that the teacher center concept possesses. Further, I view teacher centers as probably the best vehicle for addressing these issues in the next generation of educational history. Therein lies their promise.

When I discuss the need for the professionalization of educators, I'm not referring to school teachers alone, but also to school

administrators, university professors, university administrators, professional organizations, and any other who serve the educational endeavor in a professional role. Further, by the professionalization of educators I mean the ability to conform to the technical and/or ethical standards of a vocation requiring specialized knowledge and often long periods of training.

That problem, of course, is easy if one happens to be a member of a profession with clearly spelled out technicalities and standards. Although the job is not as easy in education, this speaker would argue that technical standards can be extrapolated from our knowledge about human behavior and from the bodies of knowledge that make up what we call curriculum. Although much is to be debated and much is to be argued, and although many aspects of "technical standards" remain beyond us, an analysis of current educational practices suggests that much of our behavior reflects an ignorance of some of the most rudimentary concepts and knowledge. By way of example, if there is any one topic that has been researched significantly, it is the value of retaining elementary and secondary students as a method of improving their educational performance. Even though the bulk of the information suggests strongly that it's not a particularly workable technique, it continues to purvey our educational system, though often in a masked form. To me, this presents a good example of "nonprofessional" behavior related to some sort of technical standard that defies logic and reasoning.

When one considers ethical standards as a part of true profession, one finds that education, unlike some of the other professions,

does not possess a clear set of universally acceptable guidelines. Again, however, there does appear to be a basic understanding of the ethics concerning human relationships that can be extrapolated and should guide our profession. It should be pointed out that the ethical standards which apply to teachers would also apply to administrators as well as to children and to their parents. For a moment, consider that we possessed and adhered to even a simple set of guidelines relating to communication among educators concerning their students. It would appear that many of the legal entanglements concerning student records could be avoided, as well as many of the totally personalized and unfounded analyses shared between teachers, and I might add between professors, concerning not only the academic skills but also the personalities of their students. These personalized analyses are, by the way, often recorded for posterity in a student's school records.

Obviously, the development of a true profession of education requires a high degree of continuing self analysis in conjunction with the solicitation of necessary external information. We need input for this continuing analysis not only from "experts" but also from our colleagues, from our clients, and from the community which supports our endeavor.

Once achieved, the much sought after internal regulation within the educational profession will be more than a dream, although hopefully it will include all professionals rather than just those who are currently licensed by the state.

One might ask: "How does all this relate to teacher centers?" In our recent study of teacher centers at Syracuse University, it

became apparent that teacher centers are at least one vehicle where collaboration between the various constituencies concerned about education is taking place. Although it isn't occurring at the level many of us would like, it appears that no other vehicle on the educational scene provides the forum for developing basic knowledge, creating ethical standards, and for bringing together those whose input is crucial for real professional growth. I might add that in this kind of environment, programmatic decisions are more likely to be made by an informed profession and therefore are more likely to be universally acceptable.

Although this will require a new level of openness and an ofttimes demanding amount of work on the part of those who purport to be, or to be becoming professionals, the issue is in and of itself important enough.

Certainly the spider dances of professional negotiations which we have all seen in the past few years can be considered a developmental milestone within this process. The concept of negotiation allows each member to be recognized for the skills he or she possesses and requires that they recognize areas of deficiency. It also provides for a new level of openness where people can and do place their ideas, their concepts, and their skills on the open marketplace. Certainly one can't deny the contemporary problems of compensation, job security and related professional factors, and they must be part of the mix. They shouldn't however be the exclusive mix. The contention remains that until teacher centers can serve a totally professional community, they won't achieve their full potential.

The second issue related to this speaker's interpretation of the future of teacher centers focuses on the education of the public. Implicit in the role of being totally professional, is the assumption of responsibility for helping the public clarify what it is they expect of schools and what it is that schools are capable of delivering. Certainly, part of the reason for a very discordant range of educational goals now in existence, lies with the fact that no one, especially professional educators, have taken it upon themselves to deal with the public vis-à-vis the schooling process.

Today, the public contends they want not only reading, writing and arithmetic, along with social studies and science, but also, it is not unusual for schools to be asked to solve problems of juvenile delinquency, community drug use, as well as providing good nutritional programs for children, and at the same time maintaining that implicit and very unspoken general custodial role. The demands on educators are now so great and so fluid, it's a wonder that we achieve anything.

Teacher centers again offer a vehicle, based on the involvement of the various role groups, to start to delineate the problem and work toward reasonable educational expectations. Public leadership in education must evolve from the position of being informed and must be founded on a mutual respect of educator for community and community for educator. We will then be in a better position to analyze what schools, as they are now structured, can and cannot do. If professional educators (i.e., those who possess expertise in the areas of human behavior, learning, and the various content areas) exist, they

are in a much stronger position to assume the much needed leadership role in the education of the public. One could argue, in fact, that this kind of leadership will require a high degree of aggressiveness as well as political sophistication. Once achieved, however, the consumers--and I might add the financial supporters of schools--will be in a much better position to guide our efforts. It seems to me that teacher centers cannot achieve their full potential of providing continuing professional development for educational personnel without the consent and in fact active support of an informed public.

Finally, a real profession in conjunction with an enlightened populace, will then possess the substance and sophistication to deal with the "re-politicalization" of the educational endeavor. It has been stated that since the mid-nineteenth century education has been a major political institution in America. And by political, I simply mean, of or relating to government.

Although few would deny this, all too frequently we fail to deal with the problems that arise in education as political problems. In this sense, I am using political in the best sense of the word, responsive decision-making involving the necessary constituencies. I do not mean the shrewdness, dishonesty and conniving that are so often associated with the term.

It seems, therefore, that true professionals dealing with an enlightened public within an acceptable political framework could render more defensible educational decisions based upon "out on the table" criteria. There will still be conflict. There will still be strong differences of opinion. It remains however that if these can

be dealt with for what they really are, a great potential exists for the development of alternative educational programs that really respond to the needs of children.

Because we do not currently function as a true profession dealing with an enlightened public, we frequently use the term "political" as a code word for, "affectively laden and nonoperationalized." For example, we all know that there is a strong sentiment in America for educational reform. I submit that as we sit in this room today, we would be hard pressed to develop much if any consensus concerning the questions of, "reform for what," and, more importantly, "reform to what?" All too frequently, this term, like many other terms that are labeled political, are simply terms or concepts for which we do not possess common attributes and which elicits a personalized meaning from many different people. Unfortunately, the reform of education at the present time is not a political process involving an enlightened populace and a competent profession.

I would submit that if education as a public enterprise is to survive we must set that as a goal.

The teacher center, in perhaps a more oblique way, provides a vehicle from which to initiate these activities. It is a vehicle superior to what we now have, because the focus in a teacher center is, as it should be, the improvement of teacher skills designed to help children learn. I might add that the improvement of instruction for children is a dimension that is all too frequently not part of educational decision making at the current time.

The issues presented in this brief paper in an effort to explicate some potential futures for teacher centers are not the common issues that we typically hear. We didn't talk specifically about governance of a teacher center. We didn't point out the various ways of financing a teacher center. We also didn't talk about consortium or the qualitative aspects of program development within a teacher center. They are however all implied. In my judgment they also pall to insignificance in the face of the issues presented here. That is, the professionalization of educators, the education of the public and the re-politicalization of the educational endeavor.

It seems that if we do move toward the professionalization of educators in concert with an enlightened public within an open political framework, it is altogether possible that we might just improve education within dimensions that are clearly spelled out and universally acceptable. It also appears that the teacher center movement in America provides us with a vehicle for getting on with that task.